Redemption Center

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"Decepticons attack, Decepticons retreat. Decepticons attack, Decepticons retreat." Starscream stomped up the mountain path. "Megatron's like a faulty circuit, repeating the same loop. We'll never get anywhere with that Mega-moron leading us." He chose to ignore the ornery internal voice reminding him his own plans hadn't fared any better against the Autobots. Given the opportunity to lead the full strength of the Decepticons, without Megatron's oversized head in the way, he would succeed. He would crush the silly do-gooders and bring his people the glory of genuine victory.

Not that he particularly cared about glory for every Decepticon. Certainly, Decepticons outshone Autobots in every way. That went without saying. When he thought about glorious victory for his race though, he pictured himself standing at the forefront of all the foolish followers of Megatron, acknowledged as the supreme leader of their kind. All Decepticons would bow before him. And Megatron would be there at the forefront too... on his knees before Starscream for all to see. What worth victory without a good share of humiliating defeat for his once-powerful nemesis?

He savored the image while surveying the dizzying steep drop that fell away from the narrow trail. Heights thrilled him. The only reason he wasn't

soaring over the mountaintop now was the ornery mood coloring his mental voices had seeped into every joint and circuit, surrounding him in a miasma of sullen rebellion. The others expected him to be out flying after Megatron's latest set-down, complete with the expected overly-dramatic "get out of my sight!"

Starscream considered Megatron's predictability one of his greatest faults, second only to his lame transformation that left him in a form requiring another Decepticon to employ it in order to be useful. He sneered down at the ground hundreds of feet away and kicked a stone, sending it plummeting over the edge. The way Megatron managed to frighten the others into obedience when his faults were so obvious kept Starscream in a state of perpetual frustration.

So rather than take to the skies, Starscream climbed. Not because he enjoyed it, simply because it was unpredictable. In fact, his distaste for walking instead of flying suited his mood entirely too well. Still, the heights called to him. He was never so comfortable as when he looked down on everything. Climbing the winding path fit both needs today, and should have improved his mood. Unfortunately, not even imagining Megatron's inevitable downfall could shake his simmering anger.

When would his time come? For all his narrow-vision, predictability, rages, insults and cavalier disregard for the Decepticons under his command, still Megatron ruled, and the others gave him their loyalty. That rankled most. Why would they give Megatron what they wouldn't give him? Starscream pounded his fist against the rock wall, hefting the resulting chunk of rock that chipped away. Flinging it upward and away in agitation, he watched it spin higher, his

superior strength sending it almost further than his optics could track.

The destructive action brought a small release to his tension and he wandered to the edge of the path again. The buzzing whine of the rock's descent pulled his attention around, and he watched to see where his makeshift missile landed. With a satisfying crunch, he heard it hit the mountainside above. Watching for it, his face was turned in exactly the right direction when the ricocheting chunk of mountain spun away from the impact. The airborne rock sailed straight into his left optic lens with shattering force.

Starscream yelped involuntarily, the surprise and impact driving him back a step. His arms wheeled at his sides and the sudden loss of half his optical input unbalanced him. He tumbled backward off the edge of the narrow path, in a disoriented free-fall. 'Transform,' his instincts shouted as the world spun. Jet form would prevent—

He actually heard the horrific crunch of the back of his head slamming into rock before he felt it. His consciousness flickered and all sensory input became scrambled. 'Transform!' screamed a panicked voice in his head, and he tried to force the transformation as the world spun again and his legs snapped up and back, intense pain shooting through his neural connections. His wings folded back but his legs wouldn't respond, and in another jarring twist, he was upside down again with his face impacting the rock. The fight to remain conscious and in control of his limbs and form took more than he had to give, and the remainder of the fall was a confused jumble of rock, pain and the ground hurtling ever closer. The final impact slammed through his back as he landed face up, staring dazed and uncomprehending at the sky.

He couldn't move, couldn't feel his extremities. What felt like fire sizzled along his circuits and something liquid oozed from his chest. The world dimmed. The final, fractured image his one remaining optic sensor registered was a strangely doubled impression of a dark bird wheeling overhead.

Soundwave paused in his work. Laserbeak returns. He stood and watched for his minion, surprised to see Ravage padding along in the Laserbeak's wake. He hadn't been sure which he would need to track Starscream's movements, so he'd sent both. Apparently both had succeeded.

They came to him and he rested a hand fondly on Ravage's head while Laserbeak engaged replay. Ravage's report confirmed. Two separate perspectives of Starscream's fall, both lingering morbidly on the twisted mess of metal.

Watching two versions of Starscream's... accident... had even him wanting to smile. He savored the final shot one more time, then rose and sought Megatron by following the sound of him mercilessly berating Thundercracker and Skywarp for some infraction. Casting a dismissive glance at the others, he caught Megatron's attention.

"What is it, Soundwave?" Megatron snapped.

"Information you require." Soundwave made his way back to his post.

Megatron arrived directly on his heels. "What do you have for me?"

Silently, Soundwave engaged the replays and watched in smug satisfaction as Starscream fell.

Megatron stared in fascination, then loosed his deep, maniacal laugh. "So that's where he went.

How... fitting. Shall we go collect the scraps? Eventually. He can lie there for a while... serve him right."

Soundwave didn't speak immediately, knowing Megatron's question was rhetorical. Megatron would do what Megatron decided. Others opinions mattered not at all. "A question, Megatron."

"Yes?"

"Why do you tolerate him?"

Megatron laughed again, and this time the sound held real amusement and less insanity. "Ah, Soundwave. I appreciate your distaste. But you must understand, those like Starscream are best kept as close as possible. At an arm's length, I have some idea of what he's doing." He grinned. "Besides, the amusement factor cannot be underestimated."

Soundwave didn't reply. Megatron would go out and pick up all the pieces and have them put back together. Or more accurately, Megatron would send a flunky out to pick up the pieces. Perhaps he would send Soundwave. Perhaps one or two vital pieces would get lost on the way back to the base.

Bumblebee put on a burst of speed and careened around the base of the mountain, unsure if he'd actually lost Hound or if the other Autobot had just gotten distracted. Spike laughed wildly behind the wheel, a sound Bumblebee enjoyed and attempted to prompt as often as possible. Bumblebee suddenly braked, tires kicking up choking dust in clouds. The glinting metal far ahead took on the unmistakable cast of Transformer pieces.

"What's wrong?" Spike looked out the window, but Bumblebee knew the human's eyesight couldn't make out what had brought him to a full stop.

"There's a robot in pieces."

"In pieces?"

"Let's get a closer look." He started forward again at a steady pace. Within moments, Hound drew up alongside him.

"What's got you suddenly playing it safe?" Hound called as he pulled ahead.

"There's a robot down up ahead," Bumblebee relayed, passing the exact coordinates.

"We best check it out together," Hound responded, staying close as they closed in on the wreckage.

When they were close enough for Bumblebee to make out the identity, he slowed to a stop and idled. "I don't understand. It's... Starscream."

"STARSCREAM?" Spike and Hound chorused together.

"No doubt about it."

Hound shifted forward. "Let me go in first. Could be a trap."

Bumblebee continued scanning the area. He could see nothing unusual but the tangled jumble of Starscream. He watched Hound transform, walking the last distance to Starscream and inspecting the area carefully. With a wave to Bumblebee, he knelt next to the body. Bumblebee drove forward, fully alert, rolling to a stop next to Hound and opening his door so Spike could disembark, then transforming himself.

"What happened to him?" Spike saved Bumblebee from voicing the question as they both stared. If possible, it looked even worse close up. Bumblebee felt a cold dread inside at seeing any anyone in this state.

"I'm thinking... he fell." Hound sounded puzzled by his own theory. "My scans are showing a lot of chipping and scoring on that mountainside." Hound gestured in a straight line up from where Starscream lay. "As if a whole lot of metal came tumbling straight

down, with a lot of force, at high speed. And hit every outcrop and pointed rock on the way down, which explains his... condition."

"But if he fell, wouldn't he just transform?" Once again, Spike's plaintive curiosity prevented Bumblebee from asking the obvious question. Spike was handy that way.

"You'd think," Hound muttered.

He paused then finally got to the point. "So what do we do with him?"

Hound stayed silent for long moments. "Good question." He toed the right lower leg that only remained connected by a single twisted joint at the knee. It creaked and wobbled ominously. "I don't like this. Finding him out here, no one else around. It feels like a set up. Like we're supposed to bring him back to the Ark."

"But we can't just leave him like this," Bumblebee objected.

"Why not?" Spike raised an eyebrow. "He'd leave you if he came across you in this condition."

"Well, he is a Decepticon," Bumblebee reasoned. He tried to figure out how to explain. "But... we're not. I think we need to check in with Optimus Prime."

Hound nodded. "You're right, Bumblebee. We take him to Prime. He'll know what to do. Load him up." Hound transformed, and Spike and Bumblebee wrestled the lifeless machinery into the back of the jeep.

Transforming and swinging his door open for Spike, Bumblebee spun out to follow Hound back to Autobot headquarters. The jouncing bits of Decepticon proved a grisly distraction for the entire drive.

The Autobots clustered around the fallen robot laid

out on Ratchet's table. "—just lying there at the bottom of a mountain," Bumblebee concluded. "No one else around, nothing."

"Evidence suggests he fell," Hound reported. "But it's anyone's guess how that came about, or why he didn't just transform."

"It's a trick. A set-up. Gotta be," Jazz insisted, crossing his arms and shaking his head. "Not buying this for a minute."

Ironhide nodded. "I think he's right." Even his aw-shucks drawl had a worried edge to it. Having a Decepticon, even an unconscious and grievously injured one, inside headquarters had that effect on many of the Autobots. "Remember when they cloned you, Prime? And set us up to believe you killed Starscream, when it was just a clone of him? I bet this is just another clone." He cuffed the detached arm and it clanked. "It's probably got some transmitter that's sending them information right now. Or maybe the thing is about to blow up in our faces." He paused, then suddenly took a big step backwards. Inferno and Jazz followed suit.

Optimus Prime stepped forward. "Ratchet? Wheeljack?"

"Nothing is going to explode," Ratchet scoffed. "Do you think I'd let this thing sit here if it was? It's a nonfunctioning robot. Period."

"We had Teletran-1 analyze him when we were diagnosing the damage. None of the scans turned up any devices and it is Starscream, as far as we can tell," Wheeljack agreed. "Of course, that clone of you sure seemed to be you, and we know you a lot better than we know him."

"True," Optimus mused. "But there was reasoning behind setting up that charade for the clone of me to

take out Starscream. What reasoning for leaving a smashed copy of him at the base of a mountain?"

"They couldn't know we'd bring him back here," Spike agreed.

"They could pretty well guess," Jazz countered.

"Me Grimlock say you should throw garbage out," the Dinobot sneered. "Scatter pieces." Sludge grumbled agreement.

Optimus leaned forward, balancing his fists on the table. "I understand the urge. But I don't believe that's our course of action. What I want to know, is can it be fixed? Ratchet? Wheeljack?"

"If you all stop gawking and let me work, I'll see what I can do. Can't make promises but I've seen worse. Long as you give me the orders to fix him?" Ratchet clarified.

Optimus nodded. "Fix him, but keep him restrained and under guard. We're not going to figure this out with him in this shape, but let's not be foolish. Remove his power chips for the controls of his weaponry. Everyone, be alert. Red, let's make sure security stays high."

"Absolutely, Prime."

"Everyone, to your duties." He stayed at the end of the table as the Autobots dispersed, watching as Ratchet started to work, Wheeljack hovering nearby. As the inner workings of Starscream were opened up and examined, he wondered uneasily what he was getting into.

Awareness returned all at once. Power coursed through his circuits, his optical sensors fed him visual imagery, hearing came online. Internal systems registered slower, one by one. He felt... strange, but as his head lifted and his fingers curled, he couldn't

immediately identify what was wrong. His limbs wouldn't move, but there was more to it than that.

He lowered his head back to the table, hearing someone speaking. "That's done it. He's awake. Better go get Optimus."

The word sounded like it should mean something to him. Optimus. But nothing came as he automatically accessed his memory banks. The strangeness coalesced. His memory banks responded, but felt sluggish. Large gaps in accessible data registered and internal deficiency made him dim his sight and concentrate on his memory programming. The basic subroutines functioned fine. Above that...

"Starscream. Can you hear me?"

He focused outward again and stared at the robot leaning over him. The blue lights flashing on either side of the head in concert with his words wanted to create a connection, but it just wasn't there. He knew he'd seen him before, but that was all he knew.

"Starscream?"

Starscream? Starscream. Yes, that... fit. Somehow. But how? He wasn't sure, he just knew it was important. He concentrated. His neural circuitry felt almost painful as it strained to make connections.

"Starscream? Are you in there? Maybe that didn't do the trick..."

He realized all at once that the flashing robot was addressing him, then felt stupid for being so confused. He was Starscream? A sudden wave of panic washed through him as he realized he didn't know for sure. "Starscream?" he repeated dumbly, waiting for it to jar the memory banks into action.

"So you are in there."

"Am I?" he asked automatically, disoriented. Then,

in an effort to settle at least one issue, he clarified. "Starscream. That's... me?"

"Huh. This is interesting." His questioner leaned closer, studying him. "Assuming you're telling the truth."

Why wouldn't I be? he wondered. Something kept him from asking the question, and the appearance of more robots on the other side of him banished the thought completely.

The large red and blue robot in the lead made the feeling of trying to establish connections over faulty wiring even worse. He knew beyond doubt he had seen this one numerous times, studied him, could even see his Transformation happening in his head. The image of an oversized gun superimposed itself over the impressive red cab of a semi rolling down a road and confusion reigned again. A sense of desperation filled him, followed quickly by a return of the panic. What's wrong with me?

He didn't realize he'd uttered the thought out loud until the large robot responded bluntly. "Don't even bother trying, Starscream. You can't attack. You don't have access to your cluster bombs or your null ray. We may have put you back together, but there's a limit."

Cluster bombs? Null ray? At the words, he felt an internal connection. Yes, familiar. With the thought came an immediate mental reach for the weaponry that were as much as part of him as his hands. The dull void he felt confirmed the statement. He experienced a moment of intense vulnerability, then the rest of the words sank in – "attack", "put back together" – not to mention the tone in which they were delivered.

Apparently he was not among friends, despite the feelings of familiarity.

"Ah, Optimus? I don't think he was talking about his weapons. I think he may be asking that question in a more general sense. We were just having a kinda interesting conversation."

While the blue-flashing individual talked about him as if he wasn't there, explaining his apparent lack of self-recognition, he considered the situation. So this was Optimus. That fit the feeling of recognition he felt for both the word and the robot. Optimus had the air of some sort of leader, and oddly, Starscream felt confident of his own ability to judge power-standing even though everything else felt nebulous. Obviously, no one here trusted him, and also obviously, he had been badly injured. As his disorientation settled he found his impatience rising. Stripped of weapons and he couldn't even move, yet they all stood around staring at him like he was about to explode. I must be extremely dangerous, he thought, then wondered at the flash of pleasure he felt at the idea.

"-doesn't know who he is?"

"He's lying. It's some new plot."

"I think he's telling the truth. That was some serious damage and we're talking straight to the center of everything." The blue-flashing robot tapped his forehead meaningfully.

"Wheeljack's right. We've seen this kind of injury affect the logic circuits and personality programming before..."

"Exactly!" The blue-flashing one–Wheeljack, apparently–seemed to be getting excited. Starscream finally broke into the overlapping, jabbering voices.

"Could someone explain things to me? What happened?" All attention shifted to him, and given the number of unfriendly looks he was getting, he

started to wish he hadn't spoken. Being able to sit up would be nice too.

Optimus moved closer, studying him so hard he had an immediate urge to squirm away. "You really don't remember who you are? What happened?" The deep voice noticeably softened.

"Nothing. When you mentioned it I remembered I used to have access to cluster bombs and a null ray but when he mentioned my name... nothing." He thought about trying to sound sincere, but frankly he knew he was telling the truth and he decided that would just have to be enough. "How did I get here?"

"A couple of the Autobots found you at the bottom of a mountain. No memory of what you were doing?"

Starscream tried. He concentrated again and tried to force an image, a thought, anything that might resemble a memory of being on a mountain. An accident, an attack, something, anything. Alas, nothing. Frustration chased the ever-present panic. How could he not remember? He met Optimus' gaze and shook his head, making a noise of pure desperation. "I don't understand."

Optimus continued to stare down at him, then finally nodded once. "I'm sorry we can't explain it to you. We're not sure ourselves exactly what happened. What we can tell you is that you've sustained some extensive damage." The steady voice was comforting now, the direct gaze and looming presence more solid than intimidating. Starscream found himself calming as Optimus continued, "We've repaired what we can, but apparently you're still suffering some effects. With your permission, we can try to repair more."

After a moment, Starscream realized Optimus was actually waiting for a response. For some reason, this surprised him. That kind of consideration just didn't

feel like the normal order of life. "I... yes. Please. Fix what you can."

The one called Wheeljack leaned over him again, and opened his chest plate. Making a couple of adjustments, he said, "I'm going to have Ratchet put you into a suspended state while we look at those logic circuits, alright? You'll be more comfortable."

"Alright," Starscream answered helplessly, unsure what exactly he was agreeing to but liking the sound of being more comfortable. Another joined Wheeljack and leaned over his opened chest.

A large hand fell on his shoulder from the other side of the table. He turned to see Optimus still standing close. "You're in the best hands possible," he said in that reassuring tone.

As the world faded to black once again, Starscream couldn't help but believe him.

"Well? Where is he?" Megatron demanded, as they flew in, scouring the mountainside.

"I don't understand," Soundwave intoned. "These are the coordinates."

"Look!" Thundercracker set down on the ground and pointed to the tire tracks in the dry earth.

Megatron stared at the tracks. His temper rose. Fists clenching, he alighted on the ground and released a howl of frustration and rage. "AUTOBOTS!"

As the light in Starscream's optics went dark, Optimus Prime lifted his gaze from the table, to Wheeljack directly across from him.

"Are you thinking what I'm thinking, Prime?"

"Logic circuits, personality programs..."

"Yes! This is the opportunity of a lifetime! I've

always wanted to know what makes the Decepticon's act the way they do. Haven't you? I mean haven't we all? Here's our chance to find out if we can influence it at all! If they're all lost causes who are just bad machines, or if there's some way to... I don't know... help them change. Make an impression, affect them somehow. We'll never have a better shot! And just imagine if Starscream went back to them, as a different kind of Decepticon. Maybe not as a Decepticon at all, at least not in the way we understand the word!"

Optimus straightened and rested his hands on his hips. "It's certainly compelling. Not that we know for sure it's possible, or that he's even telling the truth..."

Ratchet glanced up. "Do you honestly think he's lying about not remembering? I'm telling you this boy has some fried wires. I think Wheeljack has the right idea."

Optimus nodded. "I believe this is Starscream and I get a strong sense he doesn't remember what happened or who we are, or even who he is. Which raises the question, even if we can, should we attempt to make any adjustments to his logic patterns? I'm not sure that feels entirely... ethical."

"But Prime! It's absolutely ethical! This is the fate of Cybertron, and Earth, and Transformers and humans everywhere. This is a potential way to end this war, to see the Autobot vision of peace and freedom for everyone. What could be more ethical?"

"He's a sentient being, Wheeljack. He may not be a sentient being we agree with, but does that give us the right to mechanically alter the way he thinks? Talking him around to our way of thinking is one thing. Changing his programming sounds an awful lot like... brainwashing."

Jazz chimed in from behind Prime. "Yeah, and it's

not like the Decepticons would ever stoop to something like mind-control, right?" Low murmurs of amusement circled the room.

Hound spoke up. "Bumblebee said it earlier. We're not Decepticons. And I don't know about anyone else, but I don't want to be."

"But that's just it! That's what I'm talking about!" Wheeljack enthused. "That's why I think this is ethical. What if he doesn't choose to be the way he is? Who really knows why Decepticons are the way they are? Logically speaking, if you had a choice, who would think that way? Do the things they do? Follow Megatron?"

"Power is quite the incentive for some," Optimus began, only to be interrupted by a snort.

"Me Grimlock say if Prime not throw out garbage, then brainwash it."

Wheeljack laughed with the others, but shook his head. "I still say it's not brainwashing if I just take a look at his circuits while we're analyzing his memory banks and his personality programming, trying to figure out where the wires are crossed that's got him so confused, and see what I see. Run some scans, make sure everything is really functioning properly. What I'm talking about is leaving him open to more personal choice, not taking it away. You know you can trust me to do that, Prime. This is an opportunity to see how much of the Decepticons behavior is open to influence. I don't see how we can not look into it. Who's to say that in 'fixing' him, we aren't already putting an Autobot influence on him?"

Optimus pondered the options. He knew Wheeljack could indeed be trusted, and he made a persuasive case. Ratchet's agreement solidified the decision. "Do the scans, fix what you can. Give him every opportun-

ity to function at peak performance, with the exception of his weaponry. We still need to keep in mind that he's very dangerous. Be cautious." He paused. "But see what you can learn and if there are adjustments that would help him think for himself... do it."

Soundwave considered the evidence collected. No doubt about it, the Autobots had picked up Starscream. The question now became what would they do with him? If they finished the job the fall started, and carved him up into scrap metal, Soundwave's work was done, his objective complete. Nothing could be more perfect, actually, since it directed all of Megatron's attention to the Autobots.

If, on the other hand, they took it into their incomprehensible heads to put him back together... Soundwave couldn't decide exactly what that might mean. He couldn't imagine that they would do so, but who knew with Autobots? They protected and consorted with humans, after all. He couldn't understand how such a weak-willed, soft, and nonsensical group of beings such as the Autobots offered so much resistance to the clearly superior Decepticons.

Even if they fixed Starscream's damage, Soundwave believed he could turn that eventuality to his advantage. As of yet, he hadn't been sighted at Autobot headquarters, so his presence there was technically unconfirmed. Soundwave's minions were already in place, monitoring the Ark. They would let him know the instant he appeared, if he did.

For now, that was all he could do. Disgruntled with his lack of options, Soundwave waited impatiently for news from his minions.

When he became aware again, Starscream found himself able to sit up, but still not able to get off the table. He remembered the prior conversations with his rescuers, but still couldn't remember what happened to put him in a position to be rescued. He sat up and Wheeljack and Ratchet came to the table.

"How do you feel?" Wheeljack asked as Ratchet sent a smaller, yellow Autobot away to get Optimus Prime.

Starscream thought for a moment, doing a mental inventory. Still no weapons, still missing a lot of memory. But... calmer, and less confused. Whether it was due to already having woken once and understanding his circumstances, or whether the two had managed to clean up some mechanical problems, he found himself answering, "Better."

"Good," Wheeljack glanced at Ratchet. "How's the memory? We weren't sure how much might be affected by our work."

"Still spotty. I remember the basics – how to Transform, flying. But the context for everything is just... missing. It feels like-" He stopped suddenly, feeling silly.

"Go ahead," Ratchet urged. "What does it feel like? Maybe we can figure it out with enough information."

"It feels like it's there, but I just can't get to it yet. Almost like the circuitry is trying to make the leap, but there's a bad connection."

"Hmm." Ratchet moved away and began making some notes at a computer screen. "Is there anything more there now than there was before?"

"I don't feel so confused."

"That's gotta be an improvement," Wheeljack offered.

"Yes," he agreed readily. "Definitely. I feel like I

know you all, and that there's more I should be remembering about you. I can almost see what your Transformation shape is. We do know each other, don't we? You assumed I knew who you were, before, didn't you?"

"Yes, we all know each other," Ratchet confirmed. "So, thinking feels clearer?"

"Yes."

"And the memories feel closer, but still aren't there?"

Starscream nodded.

"Still no recollect of the mountain though? Falling?"

"Falling?" The confusion resurfaced. "Why would I fall if I can fly?"

"We were wondering," Wheeljack commented.

"No, nothing about a mountain, or falling." For a split second, the image of a bird flew across his mind. But when he concentrated on it, it was gone.

The door opened and Optimus Prime reentered the room, with the small yellow robot at his side and two much larger and well-armed Autobots at his heels. "How are you feeling?"

"Better, but still a little... lost."

"We've done as much clean up and repair on the personality programming as we dare to do for the moment, Prime. We're not sure how much circuit damage is permanent memory loss, or how much is neural trauma that might heal itself," Wheeljack explained. "We've analyzed and scanned all the logic programs and sifted everything for optimum performance. If he's..." Wheeljack suddenly paused, then turned and addressed Starscream. "Sorry. Didn't mean to just talk about you like that. If you're going recover the memories, you're in the top condition to do it."

Starscream found himself smiling, acknowledging

the courtesy. "Thank you," he said sincerely. "Thank you all for doing this for me." He cast his glance around the room. "I... gather from what's been said that we're not on the best of terms. I don't know why you would help me so much if we're not, but I... appreciate it."

"That's what Autobots do," the small yellow one spoke up. "Help." He returned Starscream's smile.

"Would you like to get out of this room? Go out and try your other form?" Prime asked, gesturing for the door.

With a start, Starscream realized he could move, more than just sitting up. He'd shifted on the table and no restraints bound him. Suddenly the alert presence of the large Autobots behind Optimus made sense. They'd planned to release him, and wanted to be prepared in case he... what? Attacked Optimus Prime with his bare hands? He glanced at the huge Autobot and almost laughed. Wondering at the wisdom of such a show of trust in him, he swung his legs off the table and stood. "Yes, I'd like that." Together, he and Optimus exited.

Soundwave watched the replays with growing fascination and pleasure. Yes, it appeared Starscream was doing his work for him. Laserbeak's careful espionage had resulted in the recording of any number of Autobots discussing the presence of the severely injured Decepticon among them. Damaged and in their custody, Starscream was either truly unaware of who he was, or pretending very very well.

All the same to Soundwave. When Ravage reported in some time after Laserbeak, with footage of Starscream flying and then returning to Optimus Prime's side, Soundwave could hardly believe it.

He rose to alert Megatron. One piece of information came through loud and clear, and it was a simple matter to twist it to his ends. Starscream was not attempting to escape. Whether he bided his time for opportunity, or waited out more repair, the same result could be conveyed to Megatron. The smallest suspicions found fertile ground in Megatron's paranoid mind, and suspicions about Starscream were hideously easy to plant given his own foolish grandstanding and constant plotting.

Finding Megatron with Rumble, Soundwave ignored the small Decepticon and spoke to Megatron. "Starscream is with the Autobots. He remains in their care and is established within the Ark."

Megatron's expression conveyed equal amounts of surprise and fury. "You're telling me he is working with the Autobots?" The scathing tone made Rumble back up a step unobtrusively.

Soundwave neatly sidestepped the question with a simple, true, response. "We have always known of his duplicitous nature. He makes no secret of his disloyalty."

"That's for sure," Rumble agreed.

"But working with Autobots? Even he wouldn't stoop so low! Undoubtedly he's hatching some new plot against me and trying to use their firepower. Of course potentially he's their captive..."

Soundwave simply stood and let his leader's paranoia work. He contributed one more smoldering fact to the growing fire of suspicions. "He is apparently well enough to Transform and fly. He has done so."

"And not escaped?" Megatron's volume climbed. "He plots against me with Prime! That despicable, traitorous..." He broke off and slammed one fist into the other palm. "The risk that he is trying to position

himself for some new overthrow effort is too great. We need to get him out of there. Rumble, gather the Decepticons within the base. Soundwave, contact those outside the base and issue orders to meet us at the Ark. It's time to pay Optimus Prime a visit. Him and his new guest."

"...ended up on Earth." Prime paused in his summarized history lesson and looked over at the rapt Decepticon. "Anything sounding familiar yet?"

Starscream shook his head. "Not yet. But... this war. You're telling me you've been fighting – sorry, we've been fighting," he corrected himself, "for millions of years? The prospect seems positively absurd."

Prime nodded. "It does, doesn't it?"

"Explain it again, why are we fighting?"

Prime tilted his head to one side. "You tell me. Autobots will fight for freedom, and for the safety of others, but we've been trying to end this war for a very long time. We won't be ruled over, or attacked indiscriminately, but we could work together to find new resources. We find this all rather senseless."

"Well, yes, I can see why," Starscream nodded, for all appearances perfectly sincere.

Prime studied him, bemused. After successfully Transforming and enjoying some short flights, Starscream had walked and talked with him for longer than he'd expected, demonstrating no inclination to escape. Ironhide and Cliffjumper followed at a discreet distance in case of any sudden attacks, but Optimus felt less and less concerned about the possibility. The more they talked, the more... well, logical Starscream seemed. Amenable. Reasonable, even. His natural intelligence showed through, and even his penchant for guile made an appearance now and again as he

asked questions about why the Decepticons or Autobots tried this particular gambit in that particular way, or why a given option wasn't utilized. But he seemed honestly struck by the underlying differentiation between Autobot and Decepticon ideology, not to mention baffled as to where he fit in, and why the Autobots continued to treat him solicitously given their history. The sounding of Red's electronic alert was almost a welcome distraction for Optimus from the conundrum this new and improved Starscream presented.

Ironhide closed in on the duo and Optimus heard his alarm going off as well. "Decepticons incoming," Ironhide called as he and Cliffjumper took up protective stances and readied themselves.

Sure enough, moments later five Decepticons appeared, Megatron in the lead. Optimus stepped in front of Starscream reflexively.

"We've come to pick up what's ours, Prime," Megatron shouted. "Do you really think you can hold one of us?"

"Do I look like I'm keeping him here by force, Megatron?" Optimus' voice boomed out, calm and amused.

"I suppose you're telling us he's free to leave anytime he wants," Megatron retorted sarcastically as his men fanned out and began to approach.

Optimus glanced at Starscream, who watched Megatron with a look of fascinated distaste. Optimus nodded and took the calculated gamble. "Actually, yes. He can. If he wants."

Megatron glared. "I don't know what game you're playing, Prime, and I don't care. You, however..." His attention shifted to his wayward second-in-command. "What is this, Starscream? If you're able to

leave why don't you? Can it be you're throwing in with the Autobots?" His tone dripped with scorn. "I know you're desperate to unseat me, but don't be a fool. Whatever promises they've made you, they'll break. You're nothing but a worthless Decepticon to them, and they won't think twice about destroying you once they've used you for whatever plan they're hatching. Get over here now."

Starscream didn't move.

Megatron's ire flared visibly. His voice rose to a harsh shriek. "I said get over here, now, you traitorous scum. You're obviously up and walking around, flying even from what I hear." At Starscream's continued stillness, he shouted, "How dare you?!" then turned back to Prime. "And you... don't think you can trust him! Trusting Starscream is a contradiction in terms. Whatever scheme you have planned, he'll betray you just like he's betrayed me all these years. This is a new low even for you, Starscream."

Prime stepped slightly to the right and gestured to Starscream. "If you want to, you can go with him," he offered. "Or, if you'd rather, you can stay with us."

Starscream tore his gaze from Megatron, and looked around at the four other Decepticons moving ever closer, weapons at the ready. "I think I'll be staying, thank you."

Optimus nodded and faced Megatron. "He says he'll be staying here, Megatron. So my recommendation would be that you and your goons not stick around."

"Why you-" Megatron sputtered madly then shouted, "Decepticons, ATTACK!"

Already prepared, Ironhide and Cliffjumper burst into action before the final syllable of Megatron's clarion sounded. As Cliffjumper fired his glass gas

projectiles at the three closest Decepticons, Optimus leapt in front of Starscream again and fired his laser rifle in quick succession at the three weakened Decepticons. "You still don't have access to your weapons! Stay back," he commanded. Ironhide came barreling in from the side and added his bulk between Starscream and the other Decepticons. With a roar of sound, Autobots piled in from the distance, squealing tires and Transforming to open fire on the Decepticons.

"We have reinforcements on the way! You cannot hope to keep him from us," Megatron shouted as he rose higher.

Prime laughed and took aim. "Don't be surprised if they're late, Megatron. They may be a little delayed by the Dinobots we set out on patrol. Do you think we didn't expect this?"

Outnumbered and outgunned, Megatron fell back and took to the sky, hollering "Decepticons, RETREAT!" His troops Transformed and hit the air after him, projectiles and explosions chasing in their wake. "Don't think this is over! We'll be back!" Megatron screamed as he dodged the fire.

As the firefight died down, Optimus and Ironhide both turned to Starscream. "Alright?" Ironhide asked.

Starscream looked from one to the other, to the rest of the Autobots congratulating each other and Transforming for the ride back to the base. "I'm fine. Thanks. But why... would you risk yourselves, for me? I'm just what he said, if what you tell me about myself is true. And it certainly looks like it is. I'm the enemy. Yet you put yourself between their guns and me."

Ironhide shrugged and smiled. "You don't have

your weapons, there. You couldn't defend yourself. Hardly seems fair, now does it?"

"Why don't we go on back to headquarters, just in case they get ideas to pick up reinforcements and try again immediately," Optimus suggested. He began walking and Starscream followed suit silently. They were almost to the Ark before he spoke.

"Why do they follow him?"

Optimus didn't need to ask for clarification. "We don't know, exactly. He's very powerful, and uses terror as a weapon. We were actually hoping you might be able to give us some insight into why the Decepticons fall into line for him."

Starscream shook his head. "Maybe if I get my memory back. Right now, I have no idea."

Back at the Decepticon base, Megatron stomped about in a rage, slamming his fist into anything that got within reach. Soundwave watched him from a safe distance, after dispatching Laserbeak to keep watch on Starscream.

This was really the most fun he'd had in years.

Starscream returned from another short flight lost in thought. The Autobots were a confusing, yet engaging bunch. He kept mentally replaying the interaction with Megatron and the Decepticons, matching it to everything Prime explained to him about their intertwined history. He wandered to a rock and sat down.

In his peripheral vision, he could see the standard two Autobots who shadowed him full time. Their presence was the only overt indication of any distrust the Autobots felt for him. Even the Autobots who clearly didn't like or trust him treated him well, with

a distant courtesy. From Optimus Prime and the 'bots who engaged him in conversation, he received pleasant companionship and an apparent willingness to take him at face value, and not hold his past crimes against him if he stood with them. He struggled to understand that kind of open camaraderie and good will, the very fact that it took so much effort to understand telling him that he hadn't experienced it much in his previous life.

He watched the Autobots interact with Optimus Prime, and thought about the Decepticons and Megatron. Having his past ideology and actions be a mystery, even to him, left him in an awkward but interesting position.

Every time he thought about the interaction with the Decepticons, the image of Megatron left him filled with disgust and anger. He had wondered if seeing the leader would be the turning point that would jar his memory, but so far no such luck. He had the same vaguely familiar sense about the Decepticons as about the Autobots. He knew he'd seen them before, interacted with them, but nothing more.

More than anything else what preyed on his mind about the brief attack and firefight was the memory of Optimus Prime stepping in front of him as if it were second nature. And even in the short time he'd known him, Starscream believed it truly was second nature. And not just Optimus, but Ironhide as well, stepping up to protect him. While Megatron and his old allies came to forcibly take him, attack him, without even finding out why he was with the Autobots.

Anger surged again and it felt... familiar. The hovering bulk of memories that he couldn't–quite–access felt closer than ever. Something told him he'd experienced similar feelings about his "fellow" Decepticons

in the past, harbored the same resentments, experienced the same feeling of isolation.

Watching the Autobots, he simply didn't see that sort of isolation. Even the loner types among them integrated, a part of the whole, a team. He wasn't surprised they held together in the face of the Decepticon attacks. Made perfect sense, really.

He found himself looking forward to going inside, joining the others in the Ark, talking with Optimus. The feeling of chances, opportunities opening up, swept through him and he rose from his seat on the rock. He tilted his head back and stared up at the blue of the sky, admiring the intense color.

A dark shape detached from the rocks above him and took wing. The distinct shape of a bird – a mechanoid bird he knew – took form against the painful blue. As it spiraled upward and away, the sensation of a dam bursting filled his head. A duplicate image of that exact shape spiraling above him, oddly doubled and seen through cracked and broken images, accompanied by pain and confusion and fear, sharpened and came into focus.

Like a key in a door, the sight of Laserbeak opened the floodgates. In an instant, Starscream knew. He knew himself and his history, remembered the accident. Knew the Decepticons, Autobots, Megatron, Optimus Prime. Knew the politics and the battles and the war. Knew the power struggles and the deceptions and the plotting. Knew.

Knew the rush of power, the lure of control, the superiority inculcated into every Decepticon.

Knew the loneliness and the isolation, the distrust and the backstabbing. The intrigues and false fronts, the arrogance and posturing. The alliances and betrayals and cross-alliances and deeper betrayals.

Knew who he was. Knew the inevitability of who he was.

Stunned and shaken, he sat back down hard, the reality of the rock beneath him grounding him. He heard his name called, and turned to stare at Optimus Prime approaching him.

"I said are you-" Prime stopped short within feet of Starscream, and a heavy silent pause hung between them. "You remember." It wasn't a question.

"I remember."

Prime nodded. "What now?"

Starscream rose to his feet. "Now... I leave." He felt other words trying to form, other thoughts trying to emerge, but he clamped down hard on it all. He turned his back on Prime and Transformed, taking to the skies.

"He just left?"

"Just like that? He got his memory back and... zoom?"

"Pretty much," Prime nodded at the questioning Autobots, waiting for someone to ask why he'd just let Starscream depart. He wasn't entirely sure what his answer would be. He guessed he'd find out when he made it.

Jazz shook his head. "Told you the boy couldn't be trusted."

"And I guess this proves to all you doubters that going in and fiddling with logic programming isn't brainwashing," Wheeljack called out.

"And this was a learning experience," Prime agreed, "which we should thank you for, Wheeljack. I think this did prove something about Decepticons."

"That you can't trust them, no matter what?" Cliffjumper asked.

Prime shook his head. "That there is a mind in there that can be reached. The fact that Starscream could listen to us and make a connection, choose to stay with us over going back to the Decepticons, when he wasn't under the full influence of Decepticon conditioning and the weight of history and his own past... well, I think that says a lot." The Autobots quieted, thinking about the implications. Prime paused, then continued. "Who knows what the future holds? Maybe his time with us will still prove to be the stronger influence."

Starscream walked into Decepticon headquarters and glanced around with a sneer. Ignoring Megatron's booming "YOU?!", he walked straight up to the Decepticon leader and put on his most nonchalant air. "Thanks for giving such a good show to the Autobots, Megatron. And without even any advance planning on our part. Your display and my excellently acted reaction were just the final touches that managed to convince them I truly didn't know who I was and might be 'salvageable'." He laughed. "Such nobility."

Megatron paused in the midst of his gathering rage. "What?"

Soundwave stood up and came closer. "Your acting?"

Starscream gave them both an affronted look. "You don't mean either of you–any of you–actually believed I'd cross over to the Autobot side?" He redoubled the disgust in his voice and added some anger. "I fell off a mountain. They found me and–who knows why–chose to fix me." He paused and looked directly at Megatron. "I assume you were just a little slower in finding me," he added sarcastically.

"We did come looking," Soundwave stated.

"Mmm." Starscream gave him a dismissive glance and turned back to Megatron. "I was there, inside the Ark, close to Teletran-1, and with my superior cunning and deception skills, decided to utilize the opportunity."

"So you really did know who you were all along," Thundercracker exclaimed.

"Of course," Starscream lied casually.

"What did you find out," Rumble asked suspiciously. "Anything we can use?"

I found out they forgive. I found out they step straight into the line of fire to protect unarmed Decepticons who have done horrible things to them. I found out they give second chances. "I didn't learn that much," he heard himself say. "At first I was too disabled, then they kept me restrained, and then under close guard." He shrugged. "I tried to take in as much as possible but it was getting intolerable staying there... surrounded by them. I finally just couldn't take it anymore."

"Understandable," Megatron nodded, still looking vaguely suspicious, but no longer about to erupt. "They're a trying group to be around. But tell me, how is it you came to fall off a cliff?"

Starscream paused, remembering the image that had restarted his memories. He turned and looked directly at Soundwave. "I had an accident," he let a hard edge creep into his voice. "As I started to fall I must have hit my head hard enough to stun myself. I wasn't able to Transform and pull out of the fall."

"You need to be more careful," Soundwave responded, blasé.

"Yes, I think I do. Don't worry, I'll make a point of it." Starscream held his gaze for another long moment, then turned away. With a casual nod at

Megatron, he started from the room. "If you'll excuse me, it's been a rough couple of days." He heard someone speak his name as he headed out the door, but he didn't look back or slow. So much was bluff and appearance here. He had to present a completely confident attitude that he had every right to be walking back in and picking right up as second-in-command, as if he'd never been gone.

As he wended his way down the back corridor toward his quarters, he heard Megatron's voice snarling something about incompetent fools. His mind kept tossing up images and comparisons of Prime's leadership and Megatron's. As he rounded a corner and the voices faded behind him, he found himself pondering the team environment Optimus created and what the Decepticons could do if they could pull together in the same kind of way, around more than fear or jealousy or intimidation. The progress they could make with a leader like Prime, if he were just a little less scrupulous and-

Just as seeing the bird had opened the floodgates, suddenly he felt as if a switch had been thrown. Starscream stopped dead in the hall. Could that be it? The answer? Could it be that easy? Had he discovered the way to overthrow Megatron once and for all, and all by hanging out with the Autobots?

He started walking again slowly, turning the idea over and over, studying it from every angle. Reviewing all his unsuccessful attempts to get the Decepticons to follow him over Megatron. The pattern stood out clearly now. This could work.

He would have to be careful. Move slowly. Nothing too soon on the heels of his unexpected stay in the Ark. Megatron would remain extra-suspicious for some time, and Soundwave... well. Soundwave would

need to be dealt with. For all this to work, he would need to plan, and bide his time, and play every move just right. He opened the door to his quarters and entered.

Planning and patience – that he could do.

He felt a twinge when he wondered what Optimus Prime would say or do if he knew how Starscream was utilizing the lesson of his kindness of the last days. From his now fully-functional memory banks, Starscream saw again the broad red shoulders moving to block him from the circling attack. Heard the gentling voice calming him during his worst confusion.

Remembered the assurances that second chances were always possible.

And closed his mental doors on the haunting thoughts as firmly as he closed the door to his room behind him.